

**University of Groningen**

## **Problemen van de bedrijfspsychologische rapportering**

Strien, Pieter Johannes van

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

1964

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Strien, P. J. V. (1964). *Problemen van de bedrijfspsychologische rapportering*. Koninklijke Van Gorcum.

### **Copyright**

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### **Take-down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.*

## *Summary*

Psychologists have been very ingenious in designing new ability and personality tests. Reporting the findings to the referral source, however, has never received the attention it deserves. Especially in the selection of personnel, where the psychologist reports to a non-professional referent, the right way of reporting is a problem.

The first five chapters of this study review the history and the present situation of industrial psychological consultation. In accordance with the European tradition, in The Netherlands a clinical interpretation of the individual case dominates over prediction on statistical lines. The appraisal of each applicant is regarded as a unique problem that asks for an individual solution. Because the psychologist does not know exactly which criteria will be most important for the employer in making his decision, he does not confine himself in his reports to a recommendation, but also renders an account of his arguments in order to allow the employer himself to decide whether the applicant is fit for the job. In addition to information relevant for the immediate decision, the report often contains hints for handling the future employee.

This way of reporting was introduced in The Netherlands about 1930 by Van Lennep. Before long several selection centers, some connected to large industries and some working independently, followed his example. The first reports were simple and concise; but influenced by the rise of personality testing and projective techniques, the reports gradually grew 'deeper' and more elaborated and aimed to give a full picture of the personality structure of the applicant. This development reached a culmination-point in the years after the last war. Many new testing-centers arose and competed to gain the goodwill of the expanding Dutch trade and industry by writing long, rich reports. In the fifties the

industrial psychologist attained an established position in the Dutch economy; it then became necessary to look for a more efficient way of reporting. There were some protests from referents 'spoilt' by the elaborate personality-sketches to which they were accustomed, but, on the whole, a greater matter-of-factness has become the rule in the last ten years.

The present situation was surveyed by the author by means of an inquiry mailed to all Dutch psychologists engaged in the selection of personnel. Nearly all of them turn out to have their own favored diagnostic methods and there is a considerable diversity in the length and the organisation of the reports delivered to the employer. There is little consensus on the direction in which the assessment of personnel and the reporting of psychological findings should develop in the future.

A survey of literature pertaining to our theme shows that the right way of reporting is a problem in all sections of psychological praxis. Of the issues discussed, the most important for the purpose of our study are:

1. The *validity* of psychological statements: As early as 1926 some critical psychologists became aware of the fact that many of the statements made on the basis of new and promising diagnostic methods can be applied to almost everyone. In the line of those findings universally valid personality sketches have been made that, presented as the results of a (fake) test, are nearly always accepted as a striking description of the subject's own personality (e.g. Paterson, Forer, Kanizsa). Psychologists are cautioned to use descriptions that are as specific as possible for the persons described.

2. The *influence of previous information* on the proper understanding of new data: Experiments of Dailey demonstrate that, where observers make judgments on the basis of partial information, their ability to develop further understanding from additional information is impaired. This can be explained as a general tendency to form the available information into a closed Gestalt at an early stage when making an opinion of another person.

3. The *agreement between the psychologist and the reader* as to the meaning of the report-statements, and the agreement between different readers of the same report. The few experiments made to measure such agreement do not allow us to draw definite conclusions. In the light of both the foregoing points we must not be too optimistic on this point.

In addition to these questions many other points are discussed in the literature. Most issues pertain to the reporting of psychological data to psychiatrists in a clinical setting, and are based more on opinion than on

research. As for the language to be used, many authors plead for semantic clarity and object to the use of technical terms (jargon) and quasi-deep or emotional language. In recent literature we note a trend to prefer predictions of overt behavior to the analysis of the underlying traits and dispositions. The specific content of the report depends on the reason for the referral. Report outlines for different purposes have been made by several authors. A number of investigations prove that the psychologist projects some of his own attitudes and defense mechanisms into the reports he writes. A question that engages the layman as well as the psychologist is the ethical responsibility for the rights of the assessed persons (i.e. the patients or applicants).

Of all those questions, the contribution of the psychological report to the employer's understanding of the applicant and to the decision he finally makes is, as the sixth chapter shows, the most pressing problem for further investigation. To evaluate the contribution of the report we first must know the employer's opinion about the candidate before he reads the report. In most cases this opinion is based on the selection interview the employer had with the applicant before referring him to the psychologist. In the light of the findings of Dailey it is to be expected that this previous opinion will influence the interpretation of the report-statements. The final agreement will thus depend on the previous agreement. In order to get an estimation of the agreement to be expected between the interview-impressions of the employer and the judgment of the psychologist, we made a survey of the literature on social perception. The impressions of non-professional judges prove to be influenced by stereotypes, self-projections and interaction effects, and, consequently, are highly unreliable. On the basis of those findings we formulated the following three hypotheses:

- I. A *divergence hypothesis*: The correlation of the employer's interview ratings with the ratings of the psychologist will, averaged over a number of traits, not exceed .30.
- II. An *adaptation hypothesis*: The average correlation of the employer's ratings with the ratings of the psychologist will be significantly higher after reading the report, than before.
- III. A *perseveration hypothesis*: The average correlation of the employer's ratings after reading the report with his own interview-ratings will be significantly higher than the correlation with the ratings of the psychologist.

After a number of pilot-investigations (reported in chapter 7), we conducted a communication experiment based on real selection cases (chapters 8-11).

With the aid of 14 psychologists engaged in the assessment of personnel in different parts of The Netherlands 43 applicants for administrative, engineering, and sales positions on a medium level were judged.

Each applicant was rated three times:

1. by the employer on the basis of his interview impressions,
2. by the employer after reading the psychological report,
3. by the psychologist who wrote the report.

We thus obtained  $3 \times 43 = 129$  ratings. The rating scales consisted of two parts: a list of 60 adjective traits (e.g. 'resolute, talkative, friendly, nervous, soft, surly, pedantic') and a list of 60 descriptions of working behavior. On the latter list 30 items described assets (e.g. 'organizes his work and uses his time efficiently', 'gives clear and comprehensive instructions to his subordinates') and 30 described liabilities (e.g. 'easily distracted from his work, makes mistakes' or 'impatient if others don't get his intentions fast enough'). Each item was rated on a five-point scale. With the aid of an electronic computer correlations among the ratings, obtained under the three judging conditions were calculated for each item.

The results confirmed our hypotheses. On the basis of the employment interview the mean correlation of the trait-ratings of the employers with the ratings of the psychologists is .22. After reading the report the mean correlations rise to .35. The mean correlation between the two ratings of the employers however is as high as .58. The correlations on the behavior ratings are still lower (on the assets .15, .28 and .51, respectively; on the liabilities .11, .27 and .49, respectively).

In spite of this notable disagreement, especially on the points necessary to make a good evaluation of the future performance of the applicant, the decision of the employer in most cases is made in accordance with the recommendations of the psychologist. In general, the employer's contentedness with the report, measured on a scale appended to the rating lists, is high. The explanation of this contrast between the subjective sense of agreement and the objective disagreement is the aim of a series of new investigations on the same data, reported in chapters 12-14. The starting point of these investigations was the resemblance between the contentedness of many employers with the selection report and the contentedness of most people with a universally valid personality sketch

presented to them. An inspection of the scores of the different items from our lists shows, that most favorable items get a high mean score and most unfavorable items a low mean score. From those means a score profile of the average applicant can be constructed, that to a certain degree can be applied to almost all individual applicants (e.g. fairly friendly, fairly intelligent, moderately suspicious, fairly decent, moderately aggressive, etc.). On the basis of conventional patterns like this the employer and the psychologist, when comparing their opinions of an applicant, may be impressed by a striking similarity on many points without being aware that there is little agreement as to the way the individual differs from the conventional pattern. This 'conventional variance' has no influence on the usual way of measuring the agreement by calculating trait by trait correlations between the ratings given by the judges to different applicants. When, however, we measure the agreement by calculating Q-correlations between the ratings given by two judges on all traits of one individual, the 'conventional' differences between the means of the traits become an important source of covariance, that may conceal a lack of differential agreement. In personality measurement, therefore, Q-correlations will often be higher than the usual R-correlations, calculated on the same data. The difference will be greater to the extent that the variability of the rated traits exceeds the variability of the rated persons. In the literature on psychological measurement (viz. Cronbach et al.) there is a growing awareness of the influence of artifacts like these.

On the basis of these considerations we formulated a new series of hypotheses with regard to the Q-correlations between the judgments of the applicants, calculated on parts of our rating lists with different degrees of variability. The results of our calculations confirm our expectations. On the 60 adjectives (showing high contrasts of favorability and content) we now get mean correlations of .39, .48 and .71. respectively. These high correlations of the ratings of the same person on varying traits reflect the usual sense of agreement between judges in every-day life, where judgments also bear upon a variety of traits of one person. In contrast, the separately calculated correlations on the (relatively homogeneous) favorable and unfavorable modes of behavior remain low (on the assets .29, .39 and .41, respectively, and on the liabilities .11, .27 and .49, respectively). If we confine ourselves to a selected sample of exclusively favorable or unfavorable items, we also get low Q-correlations on the adjective traits; further the same is true if we transform the scores on the traits in such a way that the conventional variance is cancelled out. These findings warn us not to rely on the absolute values in interpreting corre-

lation coefficients, but always to account for the way they were obtained. Though conventional agreement explains a great part of the correlation between different ratings of the same person, in most cases there also, fortunately, remains a certain degree of agreement about the way the applicant differs from the average. It would be premature however to label all this agreement as differential agreement. Part of it could also be based on a common typological frame of reference. If this were the case, we could speak of three levels of agreement: a conventional, a typological, and a differential level.

To examine the level of the agreement between the employer and the psychologist before and after reading the report, we made, in the third phase of our investigations (chapters 15-17), factor-analyses of  $3 \times 12$  ratings of applicants for the same type of job. The ratings of the psychologists and both ratings of the employers thus were brought into one matrix. The factor-analyses were made by the method of the principal components. The first and by far the most important factor corresponds to the conventional pattern from the second phase of our investigations. Almost all judgments have high loadings on this factor. The next three factors can be explained as bipolar typological factors. They account for a much smaller part of the total variance. There remains yet a series of small factors that resist a typological interpretation and represent the more specific qualities of the individual applicants.

By multiplying the loadings of the employer and the psychologist on the same factor, we can split up the correlations between two judgments into a conventional component (Factor I), a typological component (Factors II-IV) and a differential component (the remaining correlation). The correlations on the basis of the employment interview appear to be for a great part the product of conventional agreement. The increase of the correlations after reading the report can be accounted for by a closer agreement about the 'type' the applicant belongs to. The agreement about the specific qualities of the individual applicant is almost negligible in most cases. We therefore must conclude that the psychological report, in spite of its pretention to an individual appraisal, often does not exceed rough typological schemes.

A further inspection of the levels of agreement shows that the typological and differential agreement is greatest about the unsuited applicants. Either the most suited applicant really is the average man, or the assessors do not take the trouble to find out the individual characteristics of suited applicants and are content with the reassuring idea that 'everything is all right'. Important for the improvement of the communication with the referent

is the question which way of reporting has brought about the highest correlations in our experiment. A qualitative analysis of the 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' reports provided us with no clues. After that we confined ourselves to two quantitative variables that could be derived easily from the reports used in our experiments: the length of the reports (number of words) and the number of statements that go beyond the surface of directly observable behavior. Both variables have low correlations with the degree and the level of agreement. Our findings suggest that the benefits for the understanding of the described person are not outweighed by the labor involved in writing longer and 'deeper' reports. Further research with systematically varied modes of reporting will be necessary to find out how the psychologist can best communicate his findings to the referent.

We concluded the evaluation of our experiments with a discussion of the representativeness of our conclusions for the reporting praxis in general, at least in The Netherlands. It appears to us that it may have been possible that our sample is biased to a certain extent and that the conditions under which the experiment was conducted lead to a somewhat distorted picture of the real agreement. As far as this should be the case however, there is a greater chance that our conclusions give a too optimistic rather than a too pessimistic picture of the situation.

Striking the balance of our investigations we came to the conclusion that most reports do not answer their original purpose to help the referent come to a decision that is psychologically better founded and remains a decision of his own all the same. On searching for a way out of the deadlock, report-writing should not be treated as an isolated problem. Apart from the results of further communication experiments, the future development depends above all on the perspectives a profound analysis of the fundamentals of psychological praxis will open. The five main problems with their mutual connections that should be investigated are: 1. the right diagnosis, 2. the criteria guiding the assessment, 3. the language and the thought-climate of the psychologist and the referent, 4. the responsibility for the appraisal and 5. the ethics of psychological consultation.

The author hopes to enter further into these problems in a subsequent publication with the theme: knowledge and communication.